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### Cosi (1992)

*Cosi* marked a turn by Louis Nowra to more personal, autobiographical material, and the turn from the social to the individual is evident in the play itself. Through the use of psychiatric patients in the play, Nowra presents a rebellion against social norms. In terms of the play, however, this entails a rebellion more against “politically correct” attitudes than against conservative notions. This is reinforced by their juxtaposition against Nick and Lucy, Marxists whose concerns with social change and justice are undermined as the play progresses, reinforcing Lewis’s preference for the more “universal”—read, bourgeois individualist—concerns of the opera being presented. The play functions to some extent as a validation of the conservative rejection of socialist ideals.

Louis Nowra’s *Cosi*, along with *Summer of the Aliens*, which also appeared in 1992, consolidated his reputation as one of the country’s foremost dramatists. Indeed, Helen Gilbert argues that it was the commercial success of *Cosi* which “persuaded theatre companies that staging a Nowra play could be a commercially viable proposition rather than a worthwhile but risky enterprise”, and established his reputation with audiences outside of academia (“Theatre and Cultural Commerce: Louis Nowra’s *Cosi*” 191). It is perhaps no coincidence that this popularity marked Nowra’s turn away from the complexities of his earlier work to a more simplistic, autobiographical tone. Helen Thomson, reviewing the play along with *Summer*, writes that “These two plays by Louis Nowra, along with Stephen Sewell’s *Sisters* (1991) and *The Garden of Grand-daughters* (1993) have led me to conclude Australian playwriting might be in the midst of a mid-life crisis”, citing the fact that

both playwrights had displayed “A similar turn towards the private world” rather than political concerns. “Heaven help us,” she goes on to say, “if the miserable nineties have narrowed down imaginative vision to the merely personal level, reflecting perhaps the difficulty of mere survival and the apparent futility of idealism and political action” (175). This futility is present in *Cosi* in more than simply the autobiographical focus, as the personal in this case reflects not an abandonment of politics so much as the revision of earlier political tendencies.

*Cosi* tells the story of Lewis, a young university graduate who takes a job working with the patients at a mental institution. They aim to put on the opera *Così fan Tutte* by Mozart. Much of the play’s humour lies in the eccentricities of the various inmates who, Gilbert argues, function along quite conservative lines, presenting “politically incorrect” attitudes without provoking any sense of guilt: “Doug, for instance, can give voice to the aggressive misogyny [. . .] because Doug, like the other inmates, performs the dramatic function of a licensed clown who gives audiences permission to laugh without demanding any corrective action” (“Theatre and Cultural Commerce: Louis Nowra’s *Cosi*” 193). These characters reinforce by their madness acceptable guidelines of behaviour: “On a slightly different level, *Cosi*’s comedy can also be made to function as part of the required moral instruction since the inmates’ uproarious antics often highlight the boundaries between what is acceptable behaviour and what is not” (197). Despite this caveat, though, the “mad” characters in the play, while not romanticised, are perhaps the most sympathetic characters in that, as Thomson argues “The mental patients are certainly damaged, but they have at least dispensed with hypocrisy” (177).

In contrast to the asylum patients are Lewis’s university friend Nick and his girlfriend Lucy. Both of them are Marxists, and have little time for Lewis’s opera:

“You know, Marx thought Mozart was a reactionary shit” (*Cosi* 14). Nick and Lucy represent desire for change: “Barricades and bombs. Why not? Australians, especially young Australians of my age are getting fed up with our society. We want changes and we want them now!” (18). They place broader, societal concerns over personal ones:

How to understand how capitalism exploits the working class is important. How to stop the war in Vietnam is important. How to make a piece of theatre meaningful is important. After bread, a shelter, equality, health, procreation, money, comes maybe love. Do you think the starving masses of Africa or a Vietnamese peasant thinks about love? Love is an emotional indulgence for the privileged few. (50)

In contrast, Lewis is cynical about major change, viewing it as contrary to Australian character: “The French always believed their own rhetoric, Australians are suspicious of rhetoric” (50). He becomes increasingly focussed on the more “private” concerns of the opera: “It’s about important things like love and fidelity” (50), concerns whose claims to “universality” are to an extent emphasised in the play by their reflections in Lewis’s own life.

Beyond this reflection, the argument is loaded by Nick’s increasingly obvious insensitivity; he mocks Henry’s father’s war medals callously and is uncaring towards the mental patients on the whole, singing “They’re coming to take me away, ha ha, to the funny farm” (41, 69) at inopportune moments. Lucy’s social responsibility is also undermined by her personal infidelities (63). The result is that, as Jim Davidson writes, “Left-wing language has been reduced to Williamsonian simplistics, while Lewis’s girlfriend scarcely provides a feminist perspective” (49).

The Marxists are revealed to be insensitive and selfish, their postulating, as the right would argue, an ideological “mask”. The rebellion of the seventies is rewritten. In *Cosi* it is Lewis who is the rebel, shaking off the fashionable beliefs of his companions. And it is his “reality”, not their “ideology” that is ultimately validated: “The cynical and ideologically unsound opera about female infidelity, derided as reactionary and irrelevant by the political activists Nick and Lucy, actually mirrors real life with perfect accuracy” (H. Thomson, 177). It could be argued that at least part of the reason for *Cosi*’s popularity lies in the fact that it taps into discussions about “ideology” versus “reality”, the political versus the personal, the social versus the universal, and the cynicism towards Marxism and feminism which were increasingly part of the discourse of the right in an increasingly conservative Australian political climate.

Despite some comments on the initial production’s length, critical reception was overwhelmingly positive. Russell Walsh described the play as “characterised by a total lack of either aesthetic or ideological pretension”(43). Alison Cotes wrote that “The audience’s initial politically correct reaction-- ‘Is it proper to laugh at mental illness?’-- is soon shown to be small-minded, because the loonies are the ones with the real insights, and it is they who teach their director Lewis, with his half-baked, fresh-from-university idealism, the value of love”(59). Kate Herbert, similarly, wrote that Lewis chose the inmates over his student friends because “At least they are honest loonies”(43). Amanda Ball similarly endorsed the play’s priorities: “They have a war to stop-- he has a play to perform. It is a tribute to the success of Nowra’s highly personal script that we feel he is the one whose priorities are in order”(60). All of these comments appear to endorse the play’s conservative choice of personal over social values. Helen Thomson and Rosemary Neill were more critical of the

play's subplot, although the former still reviewed the play positively (42; 40).

Murray Bramwell was the critic most savage on the play's politics, writing that

Making the staging of the play in 1970 so significant that Lewis has to choose between directing the production or joining the National Vietnam Moratorium march creates what is known in show business as a false dichotomy. I have no trouble believing that Nowra's student chum was an unpleasant shit but to make him the identikit radical-- directing Brecht, caddishly seducing Lewis's girlfriend, deriding the gentle humanism of the theatre project-- is reductionist and gratuitous. This is not a benign view of the past, it is a falsification. ("Noises Off" 46)

*Cosi* aptly demonstrates the growing cynicism toward social change and an outward-looking rather than inward-looking compassion. The play undercuts the arguments of the play's socialist-leaning characters by presenting them as unsympathetic in comparison to Lewis and the "politically incorrect" inmates, and reinforces the more private, self-centric values of the opera, such as "love" and "fidelity" as more genuine and "real" than "ideological" social concerns.

### **Sweet Phoebe (1992)**

Michael Gow's *Sweet Phoebe* offers a similar vision of internal versus external focus. The play initially appears to be a satire of an inward-looking, self-centred yuppie couple. However, as the play develops and they are forced to engage with society in more broad terms, external engagement is also critiqued. The characters